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St. John's plans library for old Hall of Records Preservationists applaud the idea; [FINAL Edition]

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Abstract (Summary)

Maryland's old Hall of Records in Annapolis, built in 1934 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the state's founding, is likely to be reborn as the new library of St. John's College.

On College Avenue near St. John's Street, the Hall of Records was built on land that St. John's College sold to the state in 1934 for \$10. Laurence Hall Fowler, a noted Baltimore architect, designed it to fit in with the Colonial architecture on campus. The building features a meticulously designed interior, with patterns and symbols of Maryland carved in raised wood panels and trim in the vestibule and elsewhere.

Ocular windows in the two-story-high research room echo those of the Hammond-Harwood House in Annapolis. Six-sided brick tiles in the vestibule are like those in the old State House, and a Georgian-style plaque in the foyer commemorates the state's 300th anniversary.

Full Text (924 words)

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Maryland's old Hall of Records in Annapolis, built in 1934 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the state's founding, is likely to be reborn as the new library of St. John's College.

College administrators are negotiating with state officials to acquire the three-story landmark, the first building in the country designed as a repository for a state's archives. It has housed state offices since 1986, when Maryland opened a new Hall of Records on Rowe Boulevard.

If the college can reach an agreement with the state, administrators would renovate and expand the old Hall of Records to house the college's collection of more than 100,000 books and other reading materials. It would replace the current library, Woodward Hall, which dates from 1900 and has run out of space.

"It would be a perfect use," said Jeffrey Bishop, vice president of college advancement. "We think it makes sense from a historical point of view, an economic point of view and an aesthetic point of view."

For most colleges, the library is the heart and soul of the campus. That's especially true of St. John's, whose curriculum since 1937 has been based on the requirement that each student absorb about 130 "great books" and other "timeless and timely" readings.

At St. John's, the library is still "a place of books," Mr. Bishop said. "It's a place of study and quiet reflection. It is not a media center."

The college needs a new library because the student body has doubled in size since 1900, from 250 to 500, and the old library is outdated and undersized.

"It's woefully inadequate," Mr. Bishop said. With a new library, "we'd be able to acquire the books we need, and it would allow us to vastly increase the amount of study space students have. We could also convert the existing library to faculty offices and classroom space."

The college has hired Takoma Park-based architect Travis Price, a St. John's graduate, to prepare plans for renovating and expanding the Hall of Records to provide about 25,000 square feet of library space -- more than twice the 10,500 square feet in the current library.

Mr. Bishop said that the work would cost \$4 million to \$5 million and that the college would raise money to pay for it. Converting the present library to offices and classrooms would cost another \$1 million.

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Ocular windows in the two-story-high research room echo those of the Hammond-Harwood House in Annapolis. Six-sided brick tiles in the vestibule are like those in the old State House, and a Georgian-style plaque in the foyer commemorates the state's 300th anniversary.

"It's a nationally significant building from our point of view," said Roberto Sackett, director of preservation services for Historic Annapolis.

Area preservationists uniformly say they endorse the proposed use and applaud the college's track record in preservation.

But some are beginning to voice concerns about a number of possible modifications that college representatives have discussed in private meetings with them, such as raising the roof above the building's two-story side sections to create an extra level of space. The architect is also considering underground expansion.

Concepts floated for altering the interior, preservationists say, include inserting a second floor within the two-story-high reading space, removing the plaque that marks the state's 300th anniversary and tearing out a back wall in the vestibule and building a sweeping modern library check-out counter.

Mr. Sackett said his group supports the project but is uncomfortable with some of the design concepts he has seen. He is particularly concerned about the idea of changing the roofline, since that would alter the building's proportions.

The building is significant primarily "because of what it commemorates and because of its function," he continued. "It is also one of the last examples of Georgian-Revival architecture in Annapolis. For those reasons, we believe the building shouldn't be altered on the exterior and should be treated with a little more sensitivity than they have so far" on the interior.

"We think they can do better," agreed Historic Annapolis President Ann Fligsten. But "we don't want to be portrayed as being on a collision course with the college or in opposition, because that's not true. It's in the very early stages, and there are lots of alternatives. We're confident we can work out the design issues."

Because the building is in an historic district, renovation plans must be reviewed by a variety of boards and commissions. Mr. Bishop said college representatives have been meeting with preservationists -- to find out what alterations they would deem acceptable before the sale occurs. The college will most likely make an offer by the end of February, he added.

In conjunction with the possible sale, the state is drafting a "perpetual preservation easement" that would give the Maryland Historical Trust authority to review and approve changes proposed for the building's exterior and significant portions of the interior after the property changes hands, said William Pencek, chief of the state agency's Office of Preservation Services.

[Illustration]

PHOTO; Caption: The Hall of Records, now used as a state office building, may become St. John's College's new library.; Credit: 1958 FILE PHOTO

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